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Cambridge Scholars Publishing
2020-09-01

Kaukiainen , K 2020 , Challenging secularity. Spiritual and religious undertones in young adult dystopias. in S Isomaa , J Korpua & J Teittinen (eds) , New Perspectives on Dystopian Fiction in Literature and Other Media . Cambridge Scholars Publishing , pp. 85-100 . < https://www.cambridgescholars.com/product/978-1-5275-5539-6 >

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/327590

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Challenging Secularity: Spiritual and Religious Undertones in Young Adult Dystopias

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Dystopian novels and their film adaptations aimed at young adults (YA) are currently extremely popular, especially in the Western world. There are many explanations for the popularity of the genre among youths; ever since 9/11, future visions have grown darker, and the vast, ever-present amount of accessible information brings global threats closer, making them more tangible. Dystopias turn these fears into vivid narratives that imagine and speculate on what the fears of the future could be (e.g. Basu et al. 2013, 13; Booker 2013, 4–5). While focusing primarily on depicting undesirable aspects of future societies, dystopian descriptions aimed at youths tend to be primarily action oriented. Although they contain political messages by emphasizing individual agency, they deal less with the more profound aspects of human life, such as spirituality or religiousness.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss how YA dystopias, despite their apparent secular worldview, nevertheless draw on certain values that can be traced back to religious traditions, which the novels confine to the category of spirituality. This feature links the subgenre closely with *postsecular* thinking, in which religiousness and spirituality can be seen as strong influences in the background of contemporary novels, even when their presence is not explicitly obvious (Le Fustec 2015; McClure 2007). Instead of direct descriptions of religions of any kind, the influence of religious traditions is embedded in social structures, the choices of the characters in critical situations, and the general understanding of what is fundamentally right or wrong.

In this chapter I concentrate on American YA novels, mainly because they represent the majority of popular contemporary YA dystopias, and their movie and TV adaptations are responsible for the success of the genre. Another reason for focusing on strictly American examples is that they

reflect a rather homogenous worldview based on democratic values such as altruism, tolerance, and equality. Interestingly, these values are most notably represented through descriptions of rebellion, which is a central feature in YA dystopias.

According to sociologist Robert N. Bellah's American civil religion theory, public rhetoric in the US is its own form of religiousness, which is shown especially in beliefs, symbols, and rituals concerning the American lifestyle. The idea originated in the 1970s, but it still sheds light on the background and existence of certain values in American YA dystopias. The basis of the civil religion is in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, although it deliberately avoids references to any one religion. However, the "God" behind this rhetoric is entwined with the Western notion of God. The biblical trope of the "City upon a Hill" has provided a key historical perspective ever since the arrival of the Puritans on the continent. America is seen as the Promised Land, and the justification for the existence of American society is founded on biblical tradition. Americans are seen as the chosen people, whose manifest destiny is to set an example to other peoples. They have a universal, God-given mission to spread the message of democracy. According to this rhetoric, the ideals of liberty and freedom of speech differentiate Americans from all other nations. Essential symbols include the US flag and "sacred texts", such as the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Ritual ceremonies include, for instance, the presidential inauguration and the singing of the national anthem (Bellah 1970, 168–169; also Taylor 2007, 447–448; 527). The civil religion theory is a useful tool in observing American YA dystopian literature, because the novels so strongly stress what is worth protecting in our contemporary world – the same things are emphasized in American public rhetoric.

However, attitudes towards religion are ambivalent in YA dystopias. I have distinguished two categories. First, there are novels that exhibit future visions with a clear continuum from the world in which we now live, and the past (our contemporary world) is still lucid in memory. In these descriptions, religion is often a remnant of a lost civilisation, something that no longer has any true value. If it still exists, it is like a weak habit without any depth.[1] It is nearly always "others" who practice it. In Susan

[1] Apocalypses that describe the world falling apart belong to this category, as there is a visible contradiction between the normality of the lost world and the "abnormality" of the story's present. Novel series such as Michael Grant's *Gone* (2008–2013), Mike Mullin's *Ashfall* (2011–2014), James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* (2009–2016), and Rick Yancey's *The 5th Wave* (2013–2016) are to a great extent descriptions of reminiscences of the past, "better" world – the dystopian

Beth Pfeffer's *Last Survivors* series (2006–2013), apocalyptic events occur after the moon is struck by a meteorite, altering its orbit – this causes floods, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions on Earth. The second novel of the series, *The Dead and the Gone* (2008), exceptionally represents a religious protagonist, the 16-year-old Alex. Unlike most YA dystopian characters, he finds consolation and comfort from both his Catholic faith and his church. In the eyes of other characters, however, Alex is old-fashioned, patronising, and stubborn. His religiousness is like a weird habit that others tolerate but find annoying and incomprehensible. Alex's conviction also prevents him from making the correct and sensible choices suitable for the changed circumstances of the world. This is a good example of how religion is often seen in YA dystopias: it is tolerated so long as practicing it does not harm others, but if religiosity is used to limit autonomy, it becomes a liability.

The second distinctive category includes novels where the past has become either partially or totally forgotten. The history of the new society is its own, without an extension to life before. References to religion are only symbolic. Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series (2011–2013) presents a society where people are divided into factions according to their characteristics. They have no recollection of anything prior to this system, and religion is never mentioned.[2] Tris, the protagonist, discovers that she does not fit into any of the pre-arranged categories. *Divergent*'s story is built around Tris' remarkable individuality, which challenges the doctrinal order of her society. Generally speaking, her community can be compared to an oppressive congregation that is displeased to see its members going astray.

Another important novel series that falls into the latter category regarding its representation of religion is Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy (hereafter HG) (*The Hunger Games* [2008], *Catching Fire* [2009], and *Mockingjay* [2010]). Despite its lack of direct descriptions of religion, it contains vast amounts of symbolism that can be interpreted as religious. In this chapter, I pay most attention to HG, because the trilogy is an apt representative of the whole subgenre and it (supported by highly successful film adaptations) has been the most influential book series in the field of recent YA dystopias, at least in the Western world.[3] HG is a

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atmosphere is created as much from what has been lost as from the present intolerable circumstances.

[2] Instead, there is "a caste system", which does associate with existing religions (Hinduism).

[3] The second category comprises novels that describe a completely new world. They often feature a peculiar societal order that in the light of the missing history is taken as a norm. The stories are gathered around the protagonist's realization that there

successful combination of classic dystopian themes, for instance inequality, propaganda, and surveillance (Voigts & Boller 2015, 413). There are numerous studies concerning HG, many of them concentrating on gender roles or race (e.g. Dubrofsky & Ryalls 2014; Broad 2013). Much of the appeal of HG is the narrator-protagonist character Katniss – a young, brave yet humble, self-sacrificing girl who seems to fight the rules of her chaotic world by herself.

I will first illustrate the similarities between rebellion and religiousness, and then explain why I think that postsecularism is a suitable frame through which to observe YA dystopias. I clarify my claim with my detailed analysis of HG and other texts. I also observe how spirituality is often expressed through individuality in dystopian texts.

The long roots of rebellion

A classic theme in dystopian literature is totalitarianism. The ruling governments in dystopias resemble theocratic states where laws are doctrines and total obedience is expected. A famous example of an actual theocracy in dystopias is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), in which conservative Christians rule the future United States.[4] There is variety in the scope of control in dystopias, but in general the governments function in the same way as institutionalized churches do, be it by denying religion completely, or by presenting their own doctrines. According to Erika Gottlieb, "dystopian society functions as a primitive state religion that practices the ritual of human sacrifice", and she describes dystopian regimes as resembling "[b]arbaric state religion[s]" (Gottlieb 2001, 10–11). The dystopian classics – George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (*Мы*, 1924) – all portray "state-religions". Classic dystopias take a more critical stance in relation to religion than contemporary YA dystopias. They often satirize the "false gods" of their contemporary societies (e.g. mass media in *Fahrenheit 451* and consumerism in *Brave New World*).

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is something wrong with the system. Examples of these are, in addition to HG and Roth's *Divergent* series, Lois Lowry's *The Giver* quartet (1993–2012), Kiera Cass's *Selection* (2009–2012), Ally Condie's *Matched* (2010–2012), and Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* (2011–2013).

[4] *The Handmaid's Tale* has found new success through its new TV adaptation (2017–) on HBO.

Even though YA dystopias exploit themes similar to those of the classics, they also differ from them in their generally much happier endings. Whereas the rebellions of Winston, Montag, Bernard, and D-503 never succeed in subverting the government, totalitarian regimes in YA dystopias always tend to be overthrown. The outcome might not be exactly what the protagonists wanted, but at least the evil that used to rule is gone. This has much to do with hope, which is a common notion in YA dystopias: "in the case of young adult dystopian text, one cannot in fact do without at least a glimmer of hope" (Von Mossner 2013, 70; see also Voigts and Boller 2015, 413; Basu et al. 2013, 2). Hope is related to a commonly used term, *critical dystopia* (Baccolini & Moylan 2003, 7), which refers to dystopian descriptions that contain attempts to build a new, better life rather than dwelling on misery. Most often that occurs through rebellion. This rebellion against the violent dystopian regime is a central feature in the dystopian tradition, and it has also been fully adopted in YA dystopias. In the shadow of strict doctrinal totalitarian regimes, the resistance movements act as dissident, clandestine sects. They stand for the values of democracy described by Bellah as being among the major ideals of contemporary American society.

The rebellion in YA dystopias represents the virtues seen as worth pursuing in our contemporary world. The harsh actions of the rebels are justified – they are doing God's work. The wrongdoers are expendable, as they have deliberately made the wrong choice. This explains why violence is so unproblematically approved. When the protagonists of YA dystopias find out that there is a resistance movement, they are first delighted to realize that they are not alone with their doubts about the ruling forces. However, underlining the exceptional characters of the protagonists, they soon begin to disagree with the movement and start questioning its goals. It is important to note that the protagonists do not question the values behind the resistance, only people's motives that distort these values. This is clearly visible in HG – Katniss feels constant distrust towards the rebels. There is a similar plotline in *Divergent*, when Tris realizes that the first resistance movement she encounters (of the factionless people, who have been treated as outcasts) does not maintain true values, but rather just wants to be in charge. Later, she is extremely happy to discover a movement that opposes the functioning of her "test lab city", but soon realizes she has entered a Nazi group emphasising genetic purity, which she feels is equally bad. Tris makes individual choices that are not necessarily approved of by her family and friends, but what her "inner guidebook" (conscience?) tells her to make. Like Katniss, she is willing to sacrifice herself to save her

loved ones. Heroes or heroines are thus defined by the sacrifices – potential or actual – they are willing to make. Such decisions are deeply rooted in religious imagery.

Dystopian narratives reflect the flaws in our current world – they deal with themes such as global politics, environmental issues, social structures, ethics, and, for instance, the expectations and effects of gender roles. They give a platform to deal with difficult themes on an allegorical level (see also Basu et al. 2013, 4–5). Differing from classic dystopias, YA dystopian novels typically relegate the aforementioned themes to subordinate, more entertaining aspects of the narrative – the love story of a teenage protagonist surrounded by a great deal of impressive action (easily adaptable to the manuscript of a blockbuster movie). YA dystopias do not merely mirror our current society, but dystopian novels in general replicate forms familiar from previous texts. These are "high concept narratives" that combine elements from older texts in order to make them easily recognizable to readers (ibid., 20).

The collision of adult and adolescent worlds is a continuous theme in YA dystopias and an often-noted juxtaposition. Dystopias stress this ever-present gap by depictions of the adult order collapsing. For teenagers under pressure from their parents and teachers, dystopian descriptions of shattering the system can be satisfying. It is up to the youngsters to survive in altered circumstances where the adult order has proven to be untenable (e.g. Basu et al. 2013, 4). Noting the antithesis of the adult and adolescent worlds, any kind of organized congregation or religious community in the YA dystopia often represents the adult world – a world with regulations and control that should be avoided.

Postsecularism: A key to understanding YA dystopias

Erica Gottlieb has noted that "[d]ystopian fiction is a post-Christian genre" (Gottlieb 2001, 3). This is a secular view: if dystopia in its clearest form is something that has left Christianity behind, and any depiction of it can be seen as criticism that works towards either exposing religion's faults or burying the remains of any traces of organized religion, YA fiction has left this secular tendency behind. Ostensibly, the question of religion has been dealt with, but a completely different approach is raising its head. This is quite subtle; at first glance religion seems to be totally missing from most YA dystopian novels. Explicit portrayals of religion are still in accord with the classics: obsolete customs, isolated communities,

suppressive rules, and mad preachers – there is nothing positive or in any way forward-looking. The implicit religious elements, on the other hand, contribute to building recognizable – albeit fractional – undertones into the narratives. In dystopian worlds, where the most prominent structures of the society are distorted, these less noticeable features are left untouched and unquestioned. Dystopias seemingly shatter the values of the society by displaying an inversion of what is considered acceptable in the contemporary world. In fact, these portrayals do the opposite – by showing the worst of humankind, they underline the importance of universal moral values – altruism, tolerance, and equality. These values are strongly intertwined in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Without strict doctrines, but also by abandoning a comprehensively secularist worldview, postsecular theory is a frame into which YA dystopias fit well. Postsecular texts are not considered to contain clear religious elements; they rather have partial manifestations mixing religious and secular aspects in various combinations (McClure 2007, 3–5). According to McClure (2007, 5), religiousness is shown in current literature in multiple unorthodox forms, and no single interpretation of a doctrine is accepted so "that larger claims for any one tradition's universal reach, absolute accuracy, and authority are denied". In other words, while God is not necessarily mentioned, God is present in everyday life in small ways – in social structures, and in an overall understanding of right and wrong. "Gods appear, but not God" (ibid., 4). Scholar Amy Hungerford calls this the "[r]eligious valence of American literature" (Hungerford 2010, xiii).

Rather than talking about religiousness with its relatedness to the doctrinal and abstract notion of God, postsecular texts tend to emphasize *spirituality*, which is considered to be a more comprehensive term to describe the embodied search for transcendence. Whereas "religious" refers to the recognition of divine immanence, spirituality does not seek to separate one's physical presence and transcendence. Northrop Frye (1990, 119) describes spirituality as "the highest intensity of consciousness" that "does not run away from its physical basis or cut off its physical roots". Le Fustec (2015, 8) summarizes this by saying that "spirituality probably remains the best word to designate the concrete character of the contemporary quest for transcendence". The spiritual aspect in YA dystopias is the journey of the protagonists towards finding something better – this search functions on both concrete and metaphorical levels. Individuality is strongly emphasized as a sole source of an inner – even private – process of growing up as a person. Giordan and Pace (2012, 2) suggest that "[a]lthough 'counting on oneself' is a fragile support to make important choices, it nevertheless

offers to the subject the opportunity of having an extremely flexible system of meanings, capable of adapting quickly to the ever new biographic and social situations in a world that changes at increasing speed." YA dystopias point out that the only way to adjust to dystopian surroundings is to rely on one's individuality, when every attempt to cling to old customs is doomed to fail. Institutionalized religion thus represents stagnation, blindness in relation to altered conditions, and an inability to change. Spirituality, which does not necessarily require a community, offers an attractive alternative to traditional religiousness.

Spirituality blurs the boundaries between the self and divinity, and provides an opportunity for the transcendent to be found from within. YA dystopias often use a first-person narrator and the present tense as narrative devices to bring the events closer, and thus give the reader an opportunity to identify with the protagonist. However, at the same time this limits knowledge concerning the surrounding world to just one individual perspective. Many novels are even presented in the form of a diary (e.g. Saci Lloyd's *The Carbon Diaries* [2009, 2010] and Susan Beth Pfeffer's *Life as We Knew It* [2006]), thus focusing on the thoughts of the protagonists, to stress the importance of an individual approach. Consequently, it is notable that many YA dystopias contain a sweeping characterization of their young protagonists. Their fears, hopes, and desires are explicitly portrayed, and the hopelessness of the dystopian surroundings is expressed through their characters. Since these feelings and thoughts are so thoroughly explained, their importance regarding the plots and events in the novels is significant.

The inner monologues of the protagonists centre on a constant struggle with the self – there is a continuing pressure to be good and worthy. How are goodness and worthiness defined then? This is where the universal values step into the picture. The protagonist finds the answers to crucial questions and difficult situations through inner contemplation. In a sense, there is "an inner guidebook", a built-in storage that echoes the traditional values that can be traced back to a Judaeo-Christian heritage and the principles of the Enlightenment. The goal is to find the correct solutions and in doing so to achieve peace of mind, which resembles not only contentment originating from living by the teachings of the Bible, but a spiritual enlightenment. This spiritual "finding the answers" is a story of inner growth (also a coming-of-age story for adolescents) – a trial after which the protagonist finds his/her own path and chooses to do what is right, even if it is not the most appealing choice. On the contrary, this choice often contains an aspect of sacrifice. Furthermore, despite how different their surrounding worlds

are or how much these worlds seemingly differ from our contemporary Western society, the protagonists in the novels seem to find consistently similar moral "codes" to guide them. *Divergent*'s Tris continuously wants to fit into different groups – this longing to belong to something creates a contradiction with her strong, inner urge to make the right choices. She has to repeatedly betray those she wants to be with to pursue the greater cause of saving them. Her individual decisions and her willingness to be part of a group are in a constant conflict. Finally, her individuality wins the battle – she ends up sacrificing herself for others.

Like civil religion (and postsecularism), YA dystopias do not emphasize any particular form of religiousness. Rather, they embed a long legacy of set values that forms a bedrock of what is considered just and acceptable. The core values originating from the universal virtues of altruism, equality, and tolerance are freedom of choice, freedom of movement, and freedom of speech. Restrictions in these areas are a common theme in dystopian genre. It is these values that the Americans embrace with a religious fury, and YA dystopias simply replicate and mirror this same attitude.

Individuality and sacrifice as paths to spiritual growth

As I have already noted before, HG is a model example of a contemporary dystopian novel addressed to young readers. Alongside many classic dystopian themes, it has brought the focus even more towards celebrating individuality as a desired feature.

The scene of HG is a post-apocalyptic North America ruled by Panem, a totalitarian government based in the Capitol. Katniss lives in one of its twelve oppressed, poor districts. HG repeats a dystopian tradition of cruel survival games. Its "Hunger Games" derives from the gladiatorial combat of the Roman Empire and bears a resemblance to reality TV shows.[5] The games are the annual punishment for the people of the oppressed districts, and they function as a constant reminder of who is in charge. Each year, everyone between the ages of twelve and eighteen is obliged to participate in "the reaping", a humiliating, lottery-like selection ceremony. Two

[5] Suzanne Collins has said in many interviews that she got the idea for the book from reality TV shows (see Trierweiler Hudson 2017). However, there are earlier examples of similar settings in the dystopian genre, too – for instance *Battle Royale* (1999) by Koshu Takami and Stephen King's *The Running Man* (1982, written under the pseudonym Richard Bachman).

"tributes" –one girl and one boy from each of the twelve districts– are chosen to fight to death in an arena, and there can only be one winner.

The most significant event in HG is the reaping – it is notable that Katniss herself does not get chosen –her sister Prim does. Katniss sacrifices her own freedom, and in this way, immediately proves her uniqueness by volunteering to take Prim's place in a game where her chances of survival are nearly non-existent. Katniss does something that has never been done before. It is the 74th Hunger Games, and nobody remembers anyone ever before having volunteered to take the place of a family member. In richer districts, where joining the games is an honour, and their tributes, the "Careers", have been trained for the task throughout their young lives, it is not uncommon to volunteer for someone weaker – but the motives for doing so are entirely different from those of Katniss.

Despite the lack of visible religiousness or spirituality in HG, Katniss has been sometimes seen as a Messiah figure (see Simpson 2012).[6] It is true that HG can be interpreted in many ways through the Bible (see Hand 2015). Unexpectedly volunteering to die instead of her sister is the ultimate Christ-like act. Katniss continues to sacrifice herself (see Stewart 2013), and she can be found in settings with biblical undertones, for example, when she is grieving for her loved ones – she covers her friend Rue's dead body with flowers. Primarily, her act is an attempt to respect Rue's memory, and it arises directly from Katniss's own sorrow and hopelessness. Scattering flowers over Rue's corpse is her intuitive attempt to perform a funeral, to say a farewell to her friend, and it is most of all an attempt to remind the viewers of the humanity of the tributes – they are more than pawns on the game board.

Each of Katniss's sacrifices is also a rebellious act against the Capitol, whether or not she means it to be so. Her ultimate aim is to keep the people closest to her safe: "All I was doing was trying to keep Peeta and myself alive. Any act of rebellion was purely coincidental" (*Catching Fire*, 18). In the second novel of the trilogy, *Catching Fire*, Katniss tries to live up to President Snow's demands, but her touching, spontaneous speech in Rue's home district ignites a rebellious reaction in her audience. She is also unaware of a media trick her dress plays when it bursts into flames in front of the audience and turns her into a Mockingjay, a bird that becomes a symbol of the resistance. Although Katniss is at the centre and the prime

[6] Peeta has even been seen as a Christ figure: he is willing to die for his loved one, gives her bread, and spends three days in a cave before he "emerges" alive and well (see Moring 2012). However, these reviews seem to be mostly Christian writings to ensure the suitability of HG for young readers and moviegoers.

mover of the events, things seem to happen without her will or intention. Despite her acts of sacrifice, Katniss is not a Christ figure in the biblical sense. She is, after all, a fighter whose ultimate inspiration for rebellion lies in revenge – she wants, with her own hands, to kill Panem's President Snow, who has caused so much hardship to her and her family. This vindictive desire in no way follows Christ's path – there is definitely no "turning the other cheek".

In addition to the events she causes, Katniss's character encompasses different religiously charged roles. She is a keeper of numerous lost traditions, lives off nature, and masters the skills forgotten by others. She is an embodied memory of the lost world; for instance, she sings an old, forbidden, and nearly forgotten rebel song she learned from her father. It is important to note that she has these abilities because she has broken the law all her life by sneaking outside the fence in her district into the woods. Katniss' predilection for doing this (again) rebellious act comes from her own family's traditions – from her skilful father and her herbalist mother. The Capitol has lost connection with nature and any natural way of living. The strict oppression of the other districts has also estranged it from nature.

Spatial boundaries are typically very vague in dystopias. Voigts and Boller note that allegorically, Panem describes the split between the West and the developing world. The Capitol can be seen as the powerful centre (the West), which exploits the marginalized peripheries (developing countries) and shows "the detrimental effects of globalisation" (Voigts & Boller 2015, 413). One can assume that the overall population of the Panem is very low, so there should be immense amounts of untouched nature. Nonetheless, people live in their own little prisons, some of which are more heavily guarded than others. Katniss is unique in her relationship with nature. There is a temptation to interpret her as having an almost Wiccan connection with the wilderness, even if her relationship with nature is never expressed in spiritual terms. She does feel a sense of relief being out in the wild, but her emotions are never described being in any way spiritual, let alone religious. Even though she enjoys being in the forest, there is always a practical angle to her being there; she needs to provide food for those closest to her. At the beginning of the story, Katniss only wants to protect her "inner circle", her family and friends: "Prim … Rue … aren't they the very reason I have to try to fight? Because what has been done to them is so wrong, so beyond justification, so evil that there is no choice?" (*Catching Fire*, 88) As her worldview widens, there is a constant battle of interests: her priority still lies in guarding her family, but in the course of the events she has to make choices to include others in her inner circle, and finally she

has to include her whole society. This shows an interesting contradiction with individuality – it is the other *people* who matter and are the igniting force of her rebellion. Yet the actions leading to communal welfare are based on Katniss's individual, often revolutionary decisions. She is aware of the risks she is taking and accepts that she might die in her attempts to correct things. When she decides to kill the rebels' President Coin instead of the defeated President Snow, she is not afraid of the consequences. Ironically, Katniss punishes Coin for wanting revenge (for planning to put the children of the Capitol through the Hunger Games in turn) and seems to realize that vengeance also fuelled her all along. Katniss is finally ready to sacrifice herself for the common good. However, she does not consider herself a heroine. She feels the burden of being a human with human flaws, and in this sense she can be seen as a messianic figure:

> If I can't kill myself in this room, I will take the first opportunity outside of it to finish the job. They can fatten me up. They can give me a full body polish, dress me up and make me beautiful again. They can design dream weapons that come to life in my hands, but they will never again brainwash me into the necessity of using them. I no longer feel any allegiance to these monsters called human beings, despise being one myself […] Because something is significantly wrong with a creature that sacrifices its children's lives to settle its differences. (*Mockingjay*, 271)

This is the closest thing to transcendence in YA dystopias – the ultimate sacrifice is to give your own life in order to secure the well-being of others and by doing so, to achieve peace of mind. The afterlife is never discussed, and dying only symbolizes the end of everything; the highest prize is saving those one loves, and often the whole community.

With all the expectations, allegories, and symbolism loaded upon Katniss, it is clear that the narrative has two different levels: one of a teenage girl's fast-paced adventure and another of a heavily symbolic character who is a saviour, fire starter, nurturer, and martyr. According to Sonya Sawyer Fritz (204, 50), who observes "rebellious girlhood" in YA dystopias, Katniss is a combination of cynicism and femininity (see also Broad 2013, 126). Roberta Seelinger Trites (2014, 25) sees the HG trilogy as a serious anti-war warning that does not offer a happy ending, even though it ostensibly has one. Feminist readings of HG have objected to the ending of the trilogy: by marrying Peeta and having his children, Katniss fails to live up to expectations of her as an independent, rebellious figure. Instead, she settles for a conventional, heterosexual, nuclear family model (Broad 2013, 125). It is true that HG does not try to present Katniss

as a superhero who remains untouched by the obstacles she faces. On the contrary, by the end of the trilogy Katniss is mentally disoriented and unstable. She adjusts to a traditional gender role and even agrees to have children, because her extreme individuality has left her broken – family, communality, and reaching out to others provide her with her only chance to heal.

Conclusions

Salvation in the Christian context emphasizes salvation *sola fide* (by faith alone). According to this doctrine, it is impossible to gain redemption through individual actions. This is contradictory to YA fiction's emphasis on individuality. The purpose of the resistance movements is to change the society to correspond with liberal values that are considered to make the world automatically a better place. Instead of the promise of salvation in the afterlife, the movements seek to achieve the prize in this life, with faith being directed towards meeting earthly rather than unearthly goals. There is a fundamental quest for a paradise on Earth. By emphasising individuality, YA dystopias condemn blind faith – whether it is to an ideology, a way of life, or God. With the constant demand for alertness, they suggest that surrendering to any "imagined" higher power or trusting in its ability to protect could prove fatal.

It would be an exaggeration to argue that all YA dystopias deliberately share similar political, sociological, philosophical, and religious themes with HG, but many do, as most themes are so strongly intertwined in the logic of the dystopian adventures (see also Voigts & Boller 2015, 413). As a pioneer that closely mirrors current world problems, HG reflects the hopes and fears of adolescents in an appealing way that cannot be ignored in other stories either.

With their extended possibilities of imagination, dystopian novels have the ability to go to extremes. They exist in a realm between fundamental binaries – hope and despair, love and hate, morality and immorality, spiritual growth and stagnation, good and evil, and paradise and hell. They show the worst and the most violent things imaginable, but also reveal the best possible in their utopian dreaming. However, many YA dystopias end in a situation where the building of a new society is only starting. There is the promise of living up to the values of altruism, equality, and tolerance, but yet there is also a realistic tone suggesting that achieving these virtues is a difficult task that might fail.

It is possible to find religious "currents" in YA dystopias, but it would be more accurate to call them spiritual rather than religious. Nevertheless, their debt to religious traditions is evident. Probably unintentionally, the narratives repeat religious themes in the same way they exploit other structures of our contemporary world. Religion in its traditional sense is rarely present in YA dystopian descriptions – or at least religion does not provoke considerable feelings. Its close sibling, spirituality, has thus taken on an important role by replacing conventional religiousness, and it makes itself visible in narratives glorifying individuality as the highest virtue. This tendency corresponds with postsecular thinking, which stresses a new form of religiousness, namely individual choice and personal spiritual quests.

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